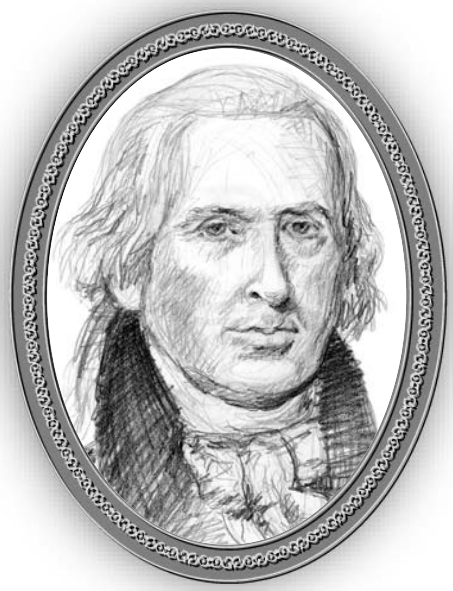
James Madison (1751–1836)



The essence of Government is power; and power, lodged as it must in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse.

—James Madison, 1787

Introduction

James Madison's slight stature and reserved personality gave little indication of the keen intellect and shrewd nature of the man. Perhaps no other person of the Founding generation had as much influence as he in crafting, ratifying, and interpreting the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. A skilled political tactician, Madison proved instrumental in determining the form of the early American republic.

Madison's political theory was founded upon a realistic view of human nature. He believed that men in society tended to form factions, defined as groups that promoted their own interest at the expense of the rest. Factions posed a special problem for democratic societies because a faction composed of the majority of the people could easily oppress the minority. To combat this, as he argued in *Federalist Paper No. 51,* power must be set against power, "ambition must be made to counteract ambition." Madison therefore favored the separation of powers within the central government and a division of power between the national and state governments. This latter concept, federalism, was a radical idea in the late eighteenth century. Few people at the time believed that power in a nation could be divided between two levels of government, each supreme in its own sphere.

Madison believed that safety lay in numbers. The more heterogeneous the society, the less chance there would be for any one group to combine with others to form a faction of the majority. Though ancient philosophers had argued that only small republics could survive for a long period of time, Madison believed the opposite. A large republic could encompass many different groups and different interests—economic, religious, and social—and thereby provide a safeguard against the tyranny of the majority.

Relevant Thematic Essays for James Madison

- Federalism
- Republican Government (Volume 2)
- Limited Government (Volume 2)

In His Own Words: James Madison

On the Problem of Faction

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about James Madison. They should first read as background homework **Handout A—James Madison (1751–1836)** and answer the **Reading Comprehension Questions.** After discussing the answers to these questions in class, the teacher should have the students answer the **Critical Thinking Questions** as a class. Next, the teacher should introduce the students to the primary source activity, **Handout C—In His Own Words: James Madison on the Problem of Faction,** in which Madison addresses the problem of faction in a democratic society. As a preface, there is **Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions,** which will help the students understand the document.

In order for the students to understand the role of factions in everyday life, the teacher should divide the students into groups based on food preference and ask each group to design a menu for the school cafeteria that is acceptable to a majority of the class. There are **Follow-Up Homework Options** that ask the students to list real-life factions that exist in their school and consider how these groups may infringe on the rights of others. **Extensions** provides opportunity for thought as students are asked to consider the role of special-interest groups in modern America.

Objectives

Students will:

- explain why Madison is often called "The Father of the Constitution"
- understand Madison's view of the Bill of Rights
- explain what Madison meant by *faction*
- understand Madison's remedy for the problem of factions in a democratic republic
- analyze the role of factions in their school

Standards

CCE (9–12): IIA1, IIC1, IIIA1, IIIA2
NCHS (5–12): Era III, Standards 3A, 3B
NCSS: Strands 2, 5, 6, and 10

Materials

Student Handouts

- Handout A—James Madison (1751–1836)
- Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions
- Handout C—In His Own Words: James Madison on the Problem of Faction

Additional Teacher Resource

- Answer Key

Recommended Time

One 45-minute class period. Additional time as needed for homework.

I. Background Homework

Ask students to read **Handout A—James Madison (1751–1836)** and answer the Reading Comprehension Questions.

II. Warm-Up [10 minutes]

A. Review answers to homework questions.

B. Conduct a whole-class discussion to answer the Critical Thinking Questions.

C. Ask a student to summarize the historical significance of James Madison.

James Madison is often called "The Father of the Constitution." He was a leader in organizing the Constitutional Convention, and many of his ideas shaped the final document produced by the delegates. After the convention, Madison co-authored the Federalist Papers, a series of newspaper essays that defended the Constitution. He also took a leading role in support of the Constitution at the Virginia Ratifying Convention. As a member of the House of Representatives, he guided a bill of rights through Congress.

III. Context [5 minutes]

A. Briefly review with students the main issues involved in the debate between Federalists and Anti-Federalists. (The Federalists believed that the confederation would break up if the Constitution was not ratified. Anti-Federalists feared that a stronger central government would endanger the rights of the people.)

B. Remind the students that James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay wrote the Federalist Papers as a series of newspaper essays to convince the people of New York of the need to ratify the Constitution. But the essays were read by many people across the country and played an influential role in the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debate.

IV. In His Own Words [25 minutes]

A. Distribute **Handout B—Vocabulary and Context Questions.**

B. Distribute **Handout C—In His Own Words: James Madison on the Problem of Faction.** Be sure that the students understand the vocabulary and the "who, what, where, and when" of the document.

C. Tell the students to imagine that they are in charge of determining the menu for the school cafeteria. Divide the class into two groups. The first group should consist of a clear majority of the class. Tell this group that they are meat eaters who do not mind having vegetarian dishes on the menu. The second group should consist of a clear minority of the class. Tell this group that they are vegetarians who desire to eliminate all meat from the cafeteria menu, despite the wishes of the meat-eating majority. Then have a student read Excerpt A to the entire class. Refer to the Answer Key for a scripted discussion of **Handout C.**

V. Wrap-Up Discussion [5 minutes]

Ask students if a larger school would reduce the problem of faction, as Madison would have predicted. If so, why? If not, why not?

Answers will vary.

VI. Follow-Up Homework Options

Have the students create a list of at least five factions at their school. They should also describe in one to three sentences how each faction infringes on or threatens the rights of other students/groups or undermines the ability of the school to educate students.

VII. Extensions

Some people today would argue that certain contemporary special-interest groups fulfill Madison's definition of a faction. Some groups are listed below.

Recording Industry Association of America <**http://www.riaa.com/news/newsletter/press2000/041100.asp**>.

National Rifle Association <**http://www.nra.org/**>.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals <**http://www.peta.org/**>.

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State <**http://www.au.org/**>.

American Association of Retired Persons <**http://www.aarp.org/**>.

Christian Coalition <**http://www.cc.org/**>.

People for the American Way <**http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/**>.

Suggestions:

A. Ask the students to research one of the special-interest groups above and list its goals. They could then list how each of these goals could infringe upon the rights of other individuals/groups or the common good.

B. Ask the students to make a list of other special-interest groups through Web searches. They could look for groups that promote similar interests, or they could find groups that are in opposition to each other.

Resources

Print

Banning, Lance. *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

Ketcham, Ralph. *James Madison: A Biography.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990.

Matthews, Richard K. *If Men Were Angels: James Madison and the Heartless Empire of Reason.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995.

McCoy, Drew. *The Last of the Fathers.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Rakove, Jack N. *James Madison and the Creation of the American Republic.* Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1990.

Internet

"The Federalist Papers." The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. <**http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed.htm**>.

The James Madison Center at James Madison University Home Page. <**http://www.jmu.edu/madison/**>.

James Madison's Montpelier. <**http://www.montpelier.org/**>.

"Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787." The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. <**http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/debates/debcont.htm**>.

The Papers of James Madison. <**http://www.virginia.edu/pjm/**>.

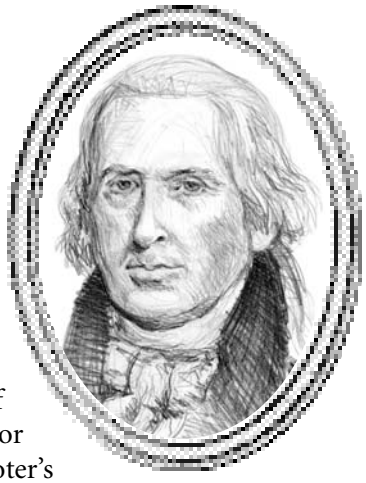
Selected Works by James Madison

- ***Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies*** (1786)
- ***The Vices of the Political System of the United States*** (1787)
- ***Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787***
- ***The Federalist Papers*** [with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay] (1787–1788)
- ***The Virginia Resolutions*** (1798)

James Madison (1751–1836)

Place three individuals in a situation wherein the interest of each depends on the voice of the others, and give to two of them an interest opposed to the rights of the third.
Will the latter be secure? The prudence of every man would shun the danger.
The rules & forms of justice suppose & guard against it.
Will two thousand in a like situation be less likely to encroach on the rights of one thousand?

—James Madison, 1821



The short, thin figure dressed in black dismounted his horse and strode toward the front door of the white farmhouse in the rolling hills of Orange County, Virginia. The year was 1788, and James Madison was campaigning for a seat in the first Congress of the United States. But he would rather have been doing almost anything else this chilly Saturday afternoon. The shy and modest son of a wealthy planter, he despised the handshaking and self-promotion that democratic politics required. Madison was at heart a thinker, a student of history and government, not a politician. Yet he wanted to play a major role in shaping the new American nation, and so he knocked on this voter's door, as he had already done dozens of times on other doors that day.

Background

James Madison did not look the part of a nation builder. He was short (only five feet, six inches in height), thin, and introverted. In poor health throughout his life, he often believed that death was near. His favorite attire was black clothing, a fitting sign of his usual dark mood. But Madison's slight appearance and somber demeanor masked a brilliant and determined man.

Born on March 16, 1751, Madison was raised on his father's plantation, Montpelier, in Orange County, Virginia. At the age of nineteen, he entered the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University), graduating two years later. Madison then began studies for the Christian ministry.

In 1772, Madison returned to Virginia. Rejecting the idea of the ministry, he turned his attention to politics and embraced the patriot cause. In 1775, he was appointed to the Orange County Committee of Safety. Later he was elected to the Virginia convention.

The Articles of Confederation

Because of his poor health, Madison did not fight in the American Revolution. Instead, he continued his political career. During the 1780s, he served in the Virginia House of Delegates and the Continental Congress. As a member of Congress, he witnessed firsthand the inability of the government under the Articles of Confederation to address many of the problems among the states. Convinced that the Articles were too weak and needed to be altered or replaced, Madison set out on a determined campaign to organize a meeting of the states to discuss amending the Articles. He met with some success in regional meetings: the Mount Vernon Conference of 1785 and the Annapolis Convention of 1786. At Annapolis, Madison and other delegates began to organize a general meeting of all the states.

In 1786 and 1787, Madison began planning for this national convention by writing out his thoughts on government. He explored how nations with weak central governments tended to fall apart. He explained why the central government created by the Articles of Confederation was too weak to solve problems among and within the states.

Central to Madison's political theory was the idea that people tend to be guided by their "passions," defined as feelings of self-interest. People usually seek to advance their own interests at the expense of others. They then form groups with others who have the same goals. Madison called these groups "factions" and feared that in a democratic society a majority faction would oppress the minority.

"Father of the Constitution"

Madison was pleased when a meeting of all the states was set for the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia. (Rhode Island was the only state that failed to attend.) So eager was he that he arrived in the city eleven days early to prepare his plans.

Many of Madison's ideas were embodied in the Virginia Plan, which was proposed by the Virginia delegation early in the convention. This plan called for a national government with powers separated among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The legislature would be split into two houses, a concept called bicameralism. The executive and judicial branches would constitute a council of revision, which could veto acts passed by the legislature. Madison also included in the Virginia Plan a provision giving the federal government the power to veto state laws.

Madison believed that it was crucial to separate powers within the central government. The resulting system of checks and balances, he believed, would prevent any faction from seizing control of the government. Similarly, the proper division of power between the national and state governments, a novel concept called "federalism," would preclude the dangerous concentration of power in any one place. Madison thought that the Articles had not given the central government enough power to check the states, and therefore he supported a stronger central government.

Madison played a major role in the debates as the convention proceeded. He spoke often in support of his ideas and designed compromises to break gridlocks. He also took detailed notes on the debates at the end of each day. Because the debates were secret, Madison's notes provide a valuable record of what happened during the convention.

On September 17, 1787, after weeks of debate, the delegates approved the Constitution. This final version closely resembled the main outlines of the Virginia Plan.

The Federalist Papers

The Constitution was then sent to the states for ratification. But there was significant opposition to the document throughout the nation. Therefore, Madison joined with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in composing a series of newspaper essays that defended the Constitution. Though intended for New York newspaper readers, the essays were also read in other states and helped to convince many to support the Constitution. They became known as the Federalist Papers. Madison wrote twenty-nine of the eighty-five essays, including two of the most famous, Nos. 10 and 51.

The Bill of Rights

Madison attended the ratification convention in his home state of Virginia. There he battled Anti-Federalist forces led by Patrick Henry, whose main objection to the Constitution was that it lacked a bill of rights. Madison at first opposed a bill of rights for several reasons: first, he argued that the rights of the people were already implied in the Constitution; second, he worried that any such listing of rights would surely omit some rights held by the people; and third, he believed that written lists of rights were not effective in protecting the liberty of the people. But Madison finally promised the Anti-Federalists that a bill of rights would be adopted after the new government went into effect.

During the debate, the Constitution went into effect when New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify it on June 21, 1788. Four days later, Virginia also approved the Constitution, and New York did so on July 26.

Madison was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1789. One of his first actions was to guide a bill of rights through Congress. Madison proposed a list of seventeen amendments, of which Congress approved twelve. Ten of the twelve were ratified by the states, and in 1791 the ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights were added to the Constitution.

"Mr. Madison's War"

Madison served eight years in the House of Representatives. During this time, he helped Thomas Jefferson organize the Democratic-Republican Party, which was formed to oppose the nationalist policies of Secretary of State Alexander Hamilton. Once in favor of a stronger central government, Madison now worried that the states could become the only strongholds against tyrannical federal power. In 1798, Madison wrote the Virginia Resolutions, which suggested that states could block unconstitutional federal laws.

In 1801, Thomas Jefferson became president. He appointed Madison as secretary of state. Madison succeeded Jefferson as president in 1809. His eight years as chief executive were troubled. The country sank into an economic depression. In 1812, the United States and Britain went to war. The United States was ill prepared. The White House itself was burned by British troops, and Madison and his wife, Dolley, were forced to flee the capital. In 1815, Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Ghent, ending the war.

Retirement

After serving as president for two terms, Madison retired to his Montpelier home. At his estate, some 100 slaves continued to toil. Despite his opposition to slavery, Madison never freed any of his slaves, not even upon his death. He knew that blacks could not immediately prosper in American society and that, therefore, sudden emancipation would be a disaster for all.

Madison stayed involved with public life by helping President James Monroe with foreign policy. He also helped Jefferson found the University of Virginia and served as its rector from 1826–1836.

Several years after the states ratified the U.S. Constitution, an admirer of James Madison labeled him "the Father of the Constitution." Madison rejected the title, rightly claiming that the document was "the work of many heads & many hands." He died at his home on June 28, 1836, at the age of eighty-five, the last of the Founders to die. Madison himself was surely surprised to have lived so long.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. Why has Madison been called the "Father of the Constitution"?
2. Why did Madison want to separate the powers of the federal government between three branches and also divide power between the federal government and the states?
3. Why did Madison originally not want a bill of rights?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. How would Madison have felt if the Constitution had not been approved by the required nine states and had therefore not gone into effect?
5. Re-read the introductory quotation by Madison at the top of Handout A. Was Madison correct in believing that people always act out of self-interest at the expense of others? Can you think of a time when you acted out of self-interest at someone's expense? Can you think of a time when you put aside your own interest to help someone else?

Vocabulary and Context Questions

Excerpts from *Federalist Paper No. 10*

1. **Vocabulary:** *Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:*
   a. actuated
   b. adverse
   c. aggregate
   d. fallible
   e. latent
   f. inference
   g. sinister
   h. compass
   i. concert
   j. oppression

2. **Context:** *Answer the following questions.*
   a. When was this document written?
   b. Where was this document written?
   c. Who wrote this document?
   d. What type of document is this?
   e. What was the purpose of this document?
   f. Who was the audience for this document?

In His Own Words: James Madison on the Problem of Faction

Excerpts from *Federalist Paper No. 10*

A

By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. . . .

B

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. . . .

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man. . . .

The inference to which we are brought is, that the *causes* of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its *effects*.

C

If a faction consists of less than a majority, relief is supplied by the republican principle, which enables the majority to defeat its sinister views by regular vote. . . .

D

When a majority is included in a faction, the form of popular government, on the other hand, enables it to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest both the public good and the rights of other citizens.

E

To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed. . . .

F

The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it; the fewer the distinct parties and interests, the more frequently will a majority be found of the same party; and the smaller the number of individuals composing a majority, and the smaller the compass within which they are placed, the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. . . .

Source: *Federalist Paper No. 10.* The Avalon Project at Yale Law School.
<**http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/federal/fed10.htm**>.